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'The Gentle Art of Re-perceiving': Post-Ceasefire Identity
in the Poetry of Alan Gillis

A novel conjecture requires a novel response

– Paul Bew

Perhaps this is the most real and intimate relation a poet can
have to a public in our time, as a great faulty image, in which
they can find their own faults and their own hidden greatness

– Edwin Muir

The opening poem to Alan Gillis's debut collection, *Somebody Somewhere*, makes a series of bold statements which, on a quick reading, appear definitive. Bearing the tongue-in-cheek title of 'The Ulster Way', the poem undertakes what seems like an exercise in Heaney and Longley bashing, locating its own field of interest far from the 'burns and hedges' of the Ulster botanist, and declaring that something new and challenging will occur in the following pages. Lines such as 'There are other paths to follow' and 'Everything is about you. Now listen' both steer the reader away from the comfort zone of comparison (there will be no unbroken lineage with the greats here), and, by seeming to relegate prior habits to the dustbin of the self-regarding, suggest an outward-looking consciousness.¹ This consciousness, one gathers, knows its turf 'like the back of [its] hand', and is well-equipped to guide the reader through it, redefining, in the process, the Northern Irish scene.²

Such, indeed, might remain the abiding impression that the book creates. The surface garb in which Belfast presents itself here – city of the 'bombed bathroom'³ and ever-present Chinook, of the unmistakeable if unpalatable identity – is an alienating combine of consumerist over-indulgence and, at times, international

facelessness: a 'post' environment reminiscent of the Celtic Tiger rather than the 'ghost book' prevalent in Ulster through the 1990s.⁴ The poems are, as Gillis himself states, decidedly 'present tense', and offer up a vision of the city which could only have been born in the wake of the cessation of hostilities.⁵ With notable exceptions (such as 'Progress'), Gillis appears, like his protagonists, to walk the city baggage-free, revelling in the opportunity to grasp an as yet untouched-upon historical moment.

This is as one might expect. Born in 1973 and coming to prominence in the early years of the twenty-first century, Gillis is one of a handful of young poets to have emerged from the province in the years between the first ceasefires in 1994 and the implementation of devolved government in 2007. The poems of *Somebody*, *Somewhere* (2004) and *Hawks and Doves* (2007), like those of Sinéad Morrissey, Nick Laird and Leontia Flynn, register and depict an atmosphere qualitatively different from any since the burgeoning of the 'Ulster Renaissance'. These are first generation peace poets, the earliest exemplars of 'what grows amid the aftershock of rainbows' (and what happens when the civil war context is taken away) (SS, 47). One might expect their 'surface imagery', as Don Paterson puts it, to be different; the only question is with what it will, in fact, concern itself.⁶ Gillis, if the first poem in his first book is to be trusted, seems ready and willing to tell his reader what this is, on no uncertain terms.

As this essay will argue, however, the contours of 'post-ceasefire' identity, as presented in his work, are neither so clearly apprehensible nor so surely drawn as the vocal flourish of 'The Ulster Way' would suggest. Rather, the poems occupy indeterminate zones, mediating between redundant pasts and nebulous futures, questioning the rhetoric of 'progress' even as they seek adequate modes of resolution.

Both representative and suggestive, they combine ‘the language of desire’ with ‘the limits of the possible’;⁷ without recourse to easy conclusions, they test imaginative potential against the recalcitrant facts of a culture which, they suggest, remains in limbo, albeit a limbo of a new and differently faceted kind to that commonly associated with Northern Ireland, and with poetry from Northern Ireland. It will be the purpose of this essay to explore the poems’ negotiation of this territory, and to analyse their various responses to its features.

Whilst discontinuity with the past remains a definite theme in ‘The Ulster Way’, and the poem seems clear on the subject of what it *isn’t* about, it’s notable that not only does Gillis fail to define his aesthetic other than in negative terms, but that, along the way, he performs a number of Muldoonesque tricky manoeuvres designed to blur rather than enhance the clarity of his position. Approximately two thirds of the poem’s space is dedicated to detailing, with empiricist intensity, all the things the reader has been told s/he won’t encounter there. And the inbuilt pun at the end (‘Everything is about you’) leaves poet and reader hawking, stuck on the question of whether what is being proposed is the very self-absorbed, subjectivist thrust the poem seemed to work against (‘everything is centred on you, born of your interpretation’), or its opposite – ‘everything is outside you, round you, not to do with you’. This is, in fact, less a poem poised between the urban and rural, dated and contemporary ‘grounds’, than a well-designed impasse that is unsure of both its ‘way’ (there’s no clear narrative development) and, crucially, of its speaker’s relationship to the path on which he finds himself. Gillis does not so much arrive in ‘The Ulster Way’ as pass through contradictory states, enacting, as he does so, a problematical staging of the intersection of the Romantic and the post-modern: the poem engages inconclusively

with the potential of the individual consciousness to act on or contribute to the landscape. There is more to it, in other words, than meets the eye.

Gillis's poem, then, might *seem* like a mere act of graffiti artistry – a superficial rejection of Heaneyesque pieties, which creates its own space more by virtue of sheer impudence than stating a challenging case. Yet its disavowance must be acknowledged as running deeper, questioning the core as well as the surface of an aesthetic the attraction of which is based on its ability to link individual with locality – to align, as Allen puts it, the space of poetry with the 'transcendentally validated space' of territory.⁸ There is an indisputable vacuum at the heart of 'The Ulster Way', an unbearable lightness of being that might easily be mistaken for the bluster of the Lyotardian 'new'.⁹ Its language is forced, its message obscure to the point of indecipherability, its general ethos more in line with Allen's definition of poetry as 'an emptiness to be filled with words' than a convincing consummation between subjective consciousness and objective world.¹⁰ Signifier, here, does not accord with signified and safely deliver sign (never mind 'road-sign'); this landscape is, as the poem's speaker acknowledges, a product of the language-loving 'head', not a realistic portrait. On the one hand, the poem might be seen as invention of the highest (and thus Romantic) order, on the other, as something which (in tandem with the worst excesses of postmodernism) is 'about' nothing more than the bandying of its own words.

There is, however, truth in both interpretations, and the conjunction of these impulses forces recognition of the precise quality of novelty (and of vacuum) that both energises and afflicts 'The Ulster Way'. As Gillis's pointed rejection of the Heaneyesque should indicate, the poem takes as a given lack of unity between human and landscape. There is no rootedness in the natural for its speaker, no unproblematic

absorption into a scene which, when it exerts its powers of ‘hoovering and scooping’, is clearly the purveyor of invasive alterity rather than confirmation (*SS*, 9). And as the location of the poem within the boundaries of Ulster implies, this sense of detachment operates within a specific geographical / political space which, at the time of the poem’s composition, remained between definitions and authorities: a ‘condition of possibility’ rather than a sealed deal.¹¹ Though it is going too far to read ‘The Ulster Way’ as political parable, the poem both registers, and works towards expressing, complex feelings of insecurity, frustration and apprehension that might usefully be linked to the destabilisation and disempowerment of a populace unmoored between historical identities. In Gillis’s self-delighting language can be glimpsed both the potential of the individual / state to create something entirely new and unencumbered (‘the capacity of human agents to change their society and to re-galvanize the social institutions which they inherit’)¹² and, conversely, the exclusion of that individual from ‘real’ involvement in the delineation of the landscape – the (dystopian) potential of language / the heterodox to get lost in a maze of its own making. A complex of warring impulses emerges from ‘The Ulster Way’. In this poem, Gillis links mastery (or otherwise) of the terrain with the possibilities inherent in language, suggests regional identity as something which, whilst needing renovation, is only in the process of finding a new shape, and registers the sense, in poetry as in society, of being on the cusp of something ‘new’. A pivotal position is as dangerous as it is exciting, and it is between these poles that his poetic swings, grappling with the attractions and repulsions of a state in which ‘There is no interpretation against which to define/ [the self]’, either as poet or as citizen (*SS*, 30).

‘On a Stark and Boundless Sundown’ presents a lyric subject who, like Mahon’s speaker in ‘Going Home’, is alive in death – beyond flux, but ‘knackered’ rather than enraptured by the experience (SS, 31). Purgatorial or in-between states figure frequently in *Somebody, Somewhere* and *Hawks and Doves*. But whereas, in poems like ‘12th October, 1994’ and ‘Carnival’, they pertain to individuals remaindered by a disappearing past (Orangemen, Loyalist paramilitaries who refuse to ‘fucking disband’), here the situation is different, indicating less the result of stubborn adherence to a passé and irrelevant identity than the chasm which occurs precisely when existing identities are taken away (SS, 12).¹³ In a critical essay on Patrick Kavanagh’s ‘The Great Hunger’, Gillis depicts the central figure of the poem, Maguire, as a symbolic inversion of Romantic nationalist tropes promulgated in the early years of the Irish Republic. This is a familiar argument, but what Gillis adds to it, as qualification, and where that qualification takes him in terms of developing a broader sociological perspective on the poem, is crucial to an understanding of his own work. Accepting that Kavanagh’s main purpose in the poem is the undermining of debilitating symbolic structures, Gillis goes on to assert that what renders ‘The Great Hunger’ ‘of continuing aesthetic importance’ is both ‘its immersion in the [very] thought structures it condemns’ and its early recognition of ‘the apparent symbolic abyss of any alternative’.¹⁴ For Kavanagh, Gillis suggests, ‘without some form of boundaries or sense of self, there can be nothing: the utopia of hybridity is as empty as the utopia of self-sufficient homogeneity’.¹⁵ In other words, the poem is pitched directly on the line between an insufficient present and the ‘abyss’ or darkness out of which a ‘something better’ has yet to be forged.¹⁶ Rejections like ‘The Great Hunger’ (or indeed ‘The Ulster Way’) of what is already in place are not necessarily formed with a made-to-order alternative in hand.

Gillis's own poems clearly despair of the identities on offer in nineties and early noughties Ulster, and of the premises by which they are maintained. In 'Carnival', the Orangeman is described in terms almost wholly external and symbolic: 'Black buffed leather-tongued brogues with oat-/meal socks and khaki Y-fronts' (*HD*, 38). His clothes render him impregnable, as armoured façade, to the outside world of 'hybridity'. In a similar vein, the Loyalist paramilitaries of '12th October, 1994' are holed up, on the eve of the Loyalist ceasefire, in the 'twilight zone' they run, and in which they can maintain the war-time identities represented by their nicknames – 'Ricky "Rottweiler" Rice', 'Markie "Life Sentence" Prentice' (*SS*, 11). Harvey Cox has remarked that 'transitions from war to peace always imply threats to the many for whom violent activity has become a way of life. There will be those left without an activity defining a role in society, a means of attaining personal prestige'.¹⁷ Likewise Paul Arthur, in relation to 'the cottage industry in navel gazing' he sees as being endemic to the Northern Irish, argues that 'Milan Kundera captured its essence in *Slowness*: "the source of fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear"'.¹⁸ What irritates Gillis, as pusher of the boundaries, is the comfortable nature of such rabbit holes – the secure space into which the man too '[sure] of his name' beats a retreat at the first sign of danger (*HD*, 41). It is the Orangeman's propensity to 'bus home, content with [his] labours,/ to watch *Countdown* and [his] favourite, *Neighbours*' that grates as much as, if not more than, the external show of belligerence: the ease with which he assumes his work to be done and the centre held (*HD*, 38). And whilst there's something almost (and disturbingly) endearing to the characterful community aspect of '12th October, 1994', it is a community conjured out of exclusivity, maintaining its cohesiveness only at the

expense of incorporation into / recognition of the wider reality of ‘the fierce grey day’
(SS, 12):

...Johnny ‘Book
Keeper’ McFeeter
saunters in and Smokey sings *The Tracks of My Tears*.
He gives the nod
to Betty behind the bulletproof screen.

Love of my life, he says, and she says,
ach Johnny...

The Shangri-Las are playing *Remember (Walkin’ in the Sand)*.
Frankie says,
no, Victor, nobody’s going to fucking disband.

(SS, 10; 12)

Having played, for the length of ‘12th October, 1994’, with the securities and insecurities of this position (the poem, a complex formal construct which suggestively relates the linguistic ‘room’ or building to the physical fortress described, depicts the protagonist playing a game of ‘virtual combat’, stepping imaginatively into paramilitary shoes), Gillis ‘leave[s] the Zone and go[es]/ back to the fierce grey day’ which, in a MacNeicean gesture, ‘looks like snow’ (SS, 10; 12). Whilst his exit clearly marks the end of Gillis’s immersion in what, for him, is a ‘virtual’ rather than a confirmed reality – a stasis to which he can’t commit himself even, or perhaps especially, on imaginative terms – the end of the poem has as much of the Mahon as the MacNeice about it, and the fact that it concludes on a note of uncertainty (it ‘looks

like' snow) indicates that, perhaps, 'incorrigible plurality' functions here as a double-edged sword. Snow has a long representative history in Northern Irish poetry. From its earliest manifestation as 'world' in MacNeice, it progresses through the work of Mahon and Longley to depict cover-ups and irresponsibility – the metaphorical whitewash of both poetic transformation and political elision.¹⁹ The silent perfection of Mahon's 'The Snow Party' ('*Elsewhere* they are burning/ Witches and heretics')²⁰ meets Longley's 'equalising lime' which, 'like a fall of snow.../ has covered our excrement'²¹ – an ironically suggestive paradigm for the 'monument to amnesia' model, which bases new identity formation on instantaneous 'forgetting' of the past.²² Snow, in Gillis, functions differently again – less as an index of the politics of memory than a disorientating blankness which actively precludes memory, rather than engaging with its contradictions and dangers. The descent into the street / world of impending snow at the close of '12th October, 1994' indicates both a hinge moment in recent Northern Irish history – the moment in which identities were poised to 'disband', face 'a new conjecture' and a new juncture – and the concomitant clean slate encountered by the poem's speaker, who walks, map-less, into the stony silence of 'the end of the poem', confronting a city and a destiny which, 'under blankets of snow, [lie] like a letter/ not yet written' (SS, 13).²³ As suggested previously, this may indicate potential – the space in which to build, utopian possibility – or, alternatively, a debilitating lack of framework; the absence of a clear backdrop against which to 'define'.

Gillis, like Kavanagh, forges a poetic which is critically immersed 'in the thought structures it condemns' – which recognises the allure of fixed identities even as it quibbles with their features. The emptiness of the landscape into which the speaker of

‘12th October, 1994’ returns at the close mirrors almost exactly Gillis’s description of what Kavanagh confronts in the wake of exposing nationalist myths:

By maintaining an apocalyptic structure, [‘The Great Hunger’] recognises the emotional pull of romantic nationalism, the apparent symbolic abyss of any alternative. The alternative that *is* postulated [is] a kind of metonymic apprehension of the world, content to forgo the stability of static integration within a fixed cosmic order²⁴

Elsewhere in Gillis’s poems, the stars reminiscent of such a ‘fixed cosmic order’ feature regularly. In ‘Big Blue Sky, Silent River’, transformed into the banality of horoscopes, they provide the aimlessly wandering speaker with predictable prognoses (‘cast off the past and begin anew./ Seek out that special someone for a rendezvous’). In ‘Casualty’, the vehicle in which speaker and partner travel has the randomness of a ‘comet’ when set against ‘orbits where the stars have ceased to war’. And in ‘Windows’, taking his cue from Wallace Stevens’s ‘Domination of Black’, Gillis creates a shifting and disorientated portrait of the poet at his computer, prompted into recognition of the ‘darkness/ rotat[ing] around this lamp’ by ‘the frame of sparkling graphics’ on his Windows screensaver (which, of course, triggers when one is failing to write, facing a blank page, lack of narrative, a ‘letter not yet written’) (SS, 34; 23; 20-21). Humans, in Gillis’s work, are usually figured as bodies, even body parts, rather than whole or organic subjects. In ‘Windows’, it is shoulders rather than a self with which the poet identifies: ‘I felt their pain – her shoulders doing gymnastics’ (SS, 20). And in the sonnet ‘Love Bites’, the lovers form a grotesque constellation of ‘arse’ and ‘coconut cups of breasts’ (SS, 22). Whilst, however, ‘Windows’ focuses on the loneliness (or lack of ‘whatness’) of the human-in-the-cosmos (‘I saw how the darkness came,/ came dancing like the frame of sparkling graphics/ and felt alone’),

‘Love Bites’ meets this with what Walter Benjamin describes as the addiction of the bourgeois subject to objects which will take his imprint – which fill, as it were, the fragile outline of his individuality:

Even if a bourgeois is unable to give his earthly being permanence, it seems to be a matter of honour to him to preserve the traces of his articles and requisites of daily use in perpetuity. The bourgeoisie cheerfully takes the impression of a host of objects. For slippers and pocket watches, thermometers and egg-cups, cutlery and umbrellas, it tries to get covers and cases. It prefers velvet and plush covers which preserve the impression of every touch.²⁵

Though the characters in ‘Love Bites’ could hardly be described as stereotypically bourgeois, they are demonstrably afflicted by the conditions of a later stage in capitalist development. In Longley’s poems of the 1970s, objects performed the (then critical) function of preserving individual identity – from invasion of the domestic space; from violence, which nullifies the particular. In Gillis’s work, it is almost as though there can never be enough objects to fuel the poem’s (and the subject’s) precarious subsistence. ‘Love Bites’ operates via a frenzied mission of accumulation, its characters only present in accordance with their ability to titillate themselves through contact with things:

The tulips he sent her lurched like a fusillade
of fingers that she snipped and tied tightly, her heart’s tourniquet...

He drank like Bloody Mary from her castanet
coconut cups of breasts in a last bid to be enthralled...

Oddly, it worked, and he said ‘I’m your snuggleupphagus’,

but she was gone. He rammed twelve pints down his oesophagus.

(SS, 22)

The fact that the animalism of their needs acts as a dehumanising rather than a validating force may seem ironic, but is in fact endemic to the condition dramatised within the poem. The proliferation and dispensability of objects within consumerist culture (what Lyotard calls the 'kitsch' or inauthentic) ensures their lack of lasting value and, concomitantly, their inapplicability as vehicles through which to define the bloating borders of the self.²⁶ With their own swollen shapes ('Love Bites' takes the template of a Shakespearean sonnet, stretching the waistline of pentameter into a longer, fourteen syllable line), Gillis's poems actively embody this condition of 'never enough'. As, without the template of traditional form, the poems have the potential to keep expanding forever, so too the individuals whose frantic bids for lasting boundaries their situations depict. Again ironically, 'Love Bites' turns the Shakespearean sonnet on its head: traditionally concerned with arguing the permanence of the lover's image, the form becomes, in Gillis's hands, its own parodic inverse, taking as subject matter an intense and swiftly extinguished sex relationship forged only out of the need for consummation.

Although, then, Gillis's characters don't exactly fit the 'bourgeois' bill of Benjamin's analysis, their nebulous outlines, 'present tense' status and inability to, as it were, 'feel [their] head[s] without touching', resonate with the latter's early recognition of the destabilising effects of consumerism-as-ethic and, more importantly, with his association of this with the shift from rural to urban, small to large scale community life (SS, 40). Benjamin's explanation for the hoarding activities of the Parisian bourgeoisie hinges on its recognition of 'the inconsequential

nature of private life in the big city', for which 'it seeks compensation within its four walls'.²⁷ In other words, the disappearance of communal identity concomitant with the urban forces the individual back on his own resources: he must either shape his own significance, or be 'content to forgo the stability of static integration within a fixed cosmic order'. As 'The Ulster Way' intimates, the shift, both imaginative and 'real', from rural to urban, small to large, has been slower in the making in Northern Ireland than in most of Western Europe. It is in fact arguable that the country boasts no 'big city'; that, as a small-scale territory, it does not and may never sustain a metropolis of the kind to which Benjamin refers. The Belfast of Ciaran Carson's writing may be alienating, surreal and über-modern, with its Saracen-filled streets, walkie-talkies and paranoid exchanges. But it is a landscape alienating by virtue of its particularity: as guerrilla war-zone, Belfast is as unmistakable in Carson's writing as it has been in the thirty years' worth of media images with which the poems dovetail. A localised space defined by a localised conflict, Carson's Belfast is mnemonic, recognisable for its 'particular value and significance', however problematic these may be. It is a city, as Cairns Craig has it, 'out of history', existing in a prolonged moment, and sustaining for the Northern Irish a resonant self-image, which maintains 'our identity' by virtue of its focus on 'the real bases of our difference'.

Craig's analysis is trained on a particular moment in Scottish history, and is worth quoting in full for what it has to say about the paradoxes inherent in the attempt to 'get back into History' (where 'History' is the enlightenment ideal of universal progress, a march towards the pinnacle of civilisation represented by the hybrid metropolis):

The struggle [in Scotland, since the 1980s] has been to reconstruct a mythic identity that is particular to Scotland and so redeems us from the banality of a universal economism that would

make us indistinguishable from everyone who lives in a modern industrial state. One moment restores our identity by making us identical with everyone else in modern societies, the other restores our identity by re-establishing the real bases of our difference; one moment puts us back into universal history, the other puts our history back into the universe by claiming for it a particular value and significance. On the one hand, we have tried to get back into History, on the other, we have tried to give ourselves back our own history.²⁸

Craig also indicates that, since the defeat by capital of other major ideologies, the ‘end’ of history (in terms of both aim and completion) has shifted from the utopian to the dystopian: ‘Beyond the end of history there is only endless boredom, with no values to fight for....When history ends there is nothing left but present consumption and the nostalgia for the historical’. ‘Contemporary capitalism’, in fact, ‘has no “end”’: ‘if capitalism – as it has been presented in the past decade – is victorious throughout the world, we will live in a place of endless production, endless consumption, endless change, endless endlessness’.²⁹

This description accords well with both the specific features and underlying thrust of Gillis’s ‘Love Bites’, which uses the surface imagery of binge culture to delineate the itch for satiation. Likewise, it finds expression both in poems which emphasise their own ‘endless’ and vertiginous ‘production’, and those which, like ‘Cold Flow’ and ‘Traffic Flow’, zero in on the concept of perpetual ‘change’ or flux. Whilst ‘Cold Flow’ looks down from the pastiche Romantic vista of Cave Hill on a panorama of Belfast coded according to confectionary (‘smoke fudges the lough like a Cadbury’s TwirlTM’), ‘Traffic Flow’ traverses the country via the mobile phone network, depicting a community which, although ‘scampering under/ the same weather, crossing lines’ never manages the – one presumes desirable – feat of ‘coming together’ (SS, 13; 17). Like its analogue, ‘Traffic Jam’, ‘Traffic Flow’ takes the

Belfast skyline (erstwhile domain of the Chinook, something which, however invasive, performed the indubitable role of bringing everyone beneath it ‘together’) and scatters the population through it, rendering it, by virtue of historical ‘normalisation’, a very different kind of labyrinth: a place where people exist in a groundless state (*SS*, 28). Not only is the individual reduced to a signal (or, as ‘Traffic Jam’ has it, the more evocative ‘number’), but the community, far from being ‘under the [same] weather’, is literally up in the air, a disparate collection of ‘somebod[ies], somewhere’.

Gillis’s poems are undoubtedly enamoured of and coloured by the local and particular (‘somebody’s/ Da says to somebody’s Ma: “Come on to fuck”’). But his is a local which has, bar a few significant exceptions, gone global: a city ‘enlarged’ by international investment and the opportunities attendant on progress, where global trends impinge on and go hand in hand with the still remaining features of the regional landscape (*SS*, 17; 56). In her poem ‘Tourism’, Sinéad Morrissey expresses irritation at Belfast’s attempts to cling to what she sees as debilitating marks of identity. Figuring the poem as a literal tour of ‘our splintered city’, she concludes by pleading that the tourists ‘come, keep coming here.../ Diffuse the gene pool, confuse the local kings’, and bemoans the fatalism with which the city’s inhabitants present themselves:

Our talent for holes that are bigger
than the things themselves
resurfaces at Stormont, our weak-kneed parliament,

which, unlike Rome, we gained in a day
and then lost, spectacularly, several days later

in a shower of badly played cards. Another instance, we say,
of our off-beat, reckless, suicidal charm.³⁰

Morrissey does recognise (and indeed support) the necessary presence in the present of the past (elsewhere she writes with affection of ‘this history’s dent and fracture’); she also preserves a healthy scepticism towards ‘the European superstate’. However, her desire for ‘new symbols’, and specifically new symbols introduced from the outside, conflicts with Gillis’s apprehensive approach to identity formed on a global model.³¹ His poem ‘To Belfast’ bespeaks admiration for a city that (*pace* Morrissey’s ‘off-beat, reckless, suicidal charm’) is ‘forever getting out of hand’, refusing to ‘stem’ to popular imagery (*SS*, 16). And, in the short and perfectly achieved poem ‘Progress’, he responds brusquely to clichéd media parlance:

They say that for years Belfast was backwards
and it’s great now to see some progress.

(*SS*, 55)

The poem’s repeat refrain of ‘I guess’ indicates that this, like Morrissey’s poem, pertains predominantly to uncertainty as regards an achieved, stable future (both were written pre-devolution). There is also, however, a hint of Craigesque offence taken at the external paradigms of ‘progress’ and ‘backwardness’ that indicates, if not quite a ‘core’/ ‘periphery’ stand-off, then at least a mote of tribal defensiveness against universal definitions.³² Alongside the recognition that ‘Like Tolstoy’s unhappy families, each situation of political conflict is unhappy’ – and thus made happy again – ‘in its own way’,³³ Gillis’s poems register, like Kavanagh’s, the fact that ‘the utopia of hybridity is as empty as the utopia of self-sufficient homogeneity’; that

‘Organicism, whilst exponentially unfashionable at the moment, is one half of most formulations of dialectical change’, and thus forms a essential part of any successful bid for ‘progress’.³⁴

Neither collection offers a definitive alternative to the dissipation of identity brought about by ‘normalisation’. The speakers of Gillis’s dialect poems derive from isolated ghetto formations like that depicted in ‘12th October, 1994’ and are, as he admits in interview, ‘not that nice’.³⁵ Likewise, in the poem ‘Harvest’, although (as in many of Morrissey’s poems) the figure of the child heralds a possible alternative, Gillis himself seems tethered to an in-between position, rejecting the ‘two peas in a pod’ conformity of his aging parents, yet unable to assume the freedom of the newly fledged:

...I lead him down the road of falling
hazels and vetch, finger to finger,
until he lets go and leaves me by a reed-shushing
brook under the sky’s orange plumes,
the fallout winds and elder
stealing kisses on the road to Killymoon.

(*HD*, 69-71)

His, unlike that of the early Longley (at least in Longley’s own analysis) is an aesthetic of the ‘en-route’ rather than the ‘end of the road’, and the comparison is instructive. Longley refers, in this statement, to a set of couplet poems which formed both the final inclusions to his first collection, *No Continuing City*, and a separate

pamphlet of their own, *Secret Marriages*, in the preface to which he offers the following reflection:

These poems [although ‘the logical conclusion of a long preoccupation with form, with stanzaic patterns and rhyme – pushing a shape as far as it will go, exploring its capacities to control and its tendencies to disintegrate’] have an air of ‘end of the road’ rather than ‘en route’ about them. The next stage would be a blank page and dead silence.³⁶

There is a wealth of unspoken (and political) implication in this. The poems in *No Continuing City* are, for the most part, architecturally imposing edifices which, in mimicking the surface prowess of the unionist stronghold, tinker at it from within. They suggest both the uneven apportioning of power within the province, and imminent rebellion amongst its ‘narrow neighbourhoods’.³⁷ Positing the lyric (and protestant) subject as synecdochic exemplar of the state, Longley works in this collection within an aesthetic of freeze-up. Accordingly, the poems can, as ‘mirrors’ as well as ‘lamps’, be as tight-lipped (or ‘tight-assed’) as the too solidly-formed identities they at once exemplify and take to task.³⁸

Gillis’s poems, by contrast, frequently enact a process of freefall, evincing confusion in the face of ever-widening vistas. ‘The Mournes’, opening poem to his second collection, records a day-trip in which, in an effort to ‘piece [them]selves back together again’, speaker and partner ‘lose the city’ for hills which, ‘like the incredible body of nobody living’, ‘hold their bulk/ defensively, ecstatically, or indifferently’ (*HD*, 11). Climbing above the confusing ruckus of ‘George and Tony masks’, ‘clamshell phones’ etc, they ‘take [their] bearings in the high bracing air’, looking out over what promises to be an unchanging landscape: a place where, like the child Gillis with his catapult, one may hit the target on the head, find clarity. The final stanza has,

however, a sting in its tail. Beyond the ‘gorges/ and tors’, the reassuring ‘Slieves sloping, as ever before’ down to the shoreline of the traditional song from which the poem takes off, the picture expands to incorporate ‘cruisers, carriers, frigates gathering for war’. As presences ‘too far out for us to see’, these niggle at the speaker’s conscience, indices of a now globally entangled identity (*HD*, 11-12). The reassurance of the home song on which the poem is based (and of which it forms a chilling update) is sinisterly reconfigured: instead of viewing, from the sea, the indisputable boundaries of home – the line where water cedes to land – Gillis’s poem works from the land outwards, marking the point at which the assured coordinates of island status blur, meet the shifting morass of water which touches on, and acts as transport between, innumerable and murkily related contexts. Like ‘Deliverance’, from which *Somebody, Somewhere* takes its title, ‘The Mournes’ conjures an atmosphere in which, as Craig says of the ‘post-world’ of global capitalism, ‘no fixed authority, no absolute centre’ manifests itself to the individual, who is nonetheless opted into and defined by the consequences of its actions.³⁹

George Quigley remarks, quoting Benjamin Jowett in relation to the urge to achieve ‘transformational change’ in post-ceasefire Ulster, that ‘a man should make a compact with his memory not to remember everything. Great memories are apt to disable judgement’.⁴⁰ As a point about the past, this is certainly borne out by the poetics of the 1990s – in Longley’s fraught dialogue between remembering and forgetting, as much as in Muldoon’s huge testaments to the paralysis of holding on. For Gillis, however, as poet of the (equally disabling) ‘present tense’, comprehensiveness is not only desirable but ethically vital. Though clearly aware of the limits of the putative bird’s-eye-view (his panoramas are always fringed by what is ‘too far out for us to see’), his play with language, interest in visual frames, and, particularly, his mooted

opposition between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, mark him as a poet for whom clarity at the expense of complexity is not to be considered. The general epigraph to *Hawks and Doves* flags up thematic concerns with inner and outer that recur throughout – in ‘In Her Room on a Light-Kissed Afternoon’ (which counters Longley’s 1970s sanctuaries with a ‘bower of words’ assaulted by ‘hate mail, emissions, election results’). And, most strikingly, in ‘Saturday Morning’, the propensity of whose self-addressing narrator to ‘raft/ into [channel-hopping] waterdark’ inscribes an easy solipsism the book works hard to challenge (*HD*, 13; 18). Television (or ‘secondary’ experience)⁴¹ functions as a double helix here. Whilst it provides for Gillis the index of our condition – assaulted on all sides by information that can neither be processed nor made sense of, but must be addressed – it is also a distraction, a ‘babbling hoodoo’ that permits the ‘blank[ing] out of mind’ of serious considerations (*HD*, 20-21). In *Somebody, Somewhere*, these considerations centre on comprehension of the individual: in ‘Porter’, ‘a television/ distract[s]’ the speaker from encountering alterity – what happens when the tongue is ‘tipped’ or poked from the mouth and into the world (*SS*, 44). *Hawks and Doves* has digested these discoveries – what Craig describes as the need to reckon with the ‘absurdity’ of continuing belief in ‘centres....whether it is a political centre or the old ghost of the liberal humanist subject’.⁴² But its brief, as ‘Saturday Morning’ suggests, has expanded to include the problematic of wider responsibilities, which must merge recognition of the impossibility of plain speech with the requirement for action.

In ‘Deliverance’, Gillis goes so far as to suggest that, against the paradigm of the ‘liberal humanist subject’, the speaker is so little in command of his circumstances that he cannot even understand the ‘message’ he’s ‘delivering’. The poem is a prime example of the subject being ‘deconstructed’, ‘shown the absurdity of [his] position

through an analysis of [his] discourse' which works to reveal him as uninspired conglomerate of external codings, not designing consciousness.⁴³ Some of the more belligerently vocal poems in *Hawks and Doves* may suggest a loss of subtlety on this front: that the difficult transition between first and second collections has blunted the need for scrupulousness in the service of speaking out. There is a barely suppressed anger to a number of the poems which, on occasion (as in 'Bob the Builder is a Dickhead'), coincides with what seems, to Gillis, the necessary directness of a style which pulls no punches. Burke, as it were, has ceded to Paine (or Derrida to Paine, perhaps); the 'ghost of the liberal humanist subject' has returned to haunt a poetic which, alongside late Mahon, feels the need to substitute the garb of the activist for that of the aesthete.

The position of the subject (and, thus, the speaking subject) has, however, always been integral to Gillis's politics, his poetic coincident with his socio-political perspective. Even in the more aggressively pointed poems like 'Bob the Builder', the proclivity of 'consciousness' to 'proceed directly to an impasse' is emphasised, and the need for the way 'it' is to be 'spelt out' tempered by awareness that there is 'no constant path' for either the 'mind-boggled rover' or the 'taxpaying citizen':

'*whatever* you reckon,/ your thoughts will self-destruct in fifteen seconds' (*HD*, 33-35; italics mine). If *Hawks and Doves* is, as its title suggests, a collection caught between debating binaries (and primarily the binaries of philosophical 'truth' and political 'responsibility'), then the former is never far from Gillis's mind. 'Truth' represents, in fact, less an ineffectual 'dove' disposed to 'look the other way' than a handmaiden to the 'braying [public] fury' of the hawk – the very image of the conditions, both local and global, with which that hawk engages (*HD*, 60).

Hawks and Doves hosts a number of driving poems – poems about steering or being steered – which have at their core a concern with the individual’s involvement in his own fate, and suggest effective paradigms for the status of Northern Ireland at the time of the book’s composition. In ‘The Lights’ (*HD*, 37), Gillis presents one of the collection’s most prominent types: someone who refuses to ‘buck [him]self up’, is lost amidst the ‘rainbow coalition’ of alternative identities. The poem ends with the lights on ‘orange’, a colour much employed throughout the collection but which indicates less a jab at unionism (and thus lagging identities) than a dramatisation of the ‘in-between’. This dramatisation is conducted both in terms of the arguments promulgated above concerning hybridity and organicism (‘titillated go-go displays’ jostle with ‘burnt homes under boarding’), but also, one might argue, of the at the time unresolved issue of self-government (where the individual’s condition is symptomatic of the state’s). Gillis, crucially, is being driven rather than driving in this poem, which takes its coordinates from MacNeice’s ‘Hold-up’ and presents a subject similarly stalled, ‘held [like] a corpse in pickle’ with ‘His ear...cocked’ for an answer or definition.⁴⁴ The main body of the poem comprises a single, sinuous sentence which is simultaneously exploratory and confusing; as a tightly-knit sonnet, however, it pulls up before it can reach its destination or make sense of the material. Language, like the subject himself, fails to reach its potential in this poem – not least because it is under the jurisdiction of an external influence. The elder brother ‘drum[ming] his fingers in/ a rhythm on my head’ – literally drumming the poem’s rhythm into being – correlates suggestively not only with the poem’s dependence on a prior template through which to exercise its own concerns, but also (and in conjunction with the peripherally present sister) with the paternalistic function of both British and Irish states in the implementation and liquidation of the Northern Irish parliament in the

years between 2001 and 2007.⁴⁵ Gillis's poem (which, if one takes the re-write argument to its logical conclusion, is, in fact, only half his) expresses frustration not only at not being able to go anywhere but, more particularly, at not being able to go its own way.

When Gillis himself takes to the wheel, the situation is, accordingly, different. Shucking off the corset of a tight, traditional form, 'Driving Home' (*HD*, 52-55) leaves behind 'bosses' and 'to-do lists' – what its speaker might call the 'prissy barrier[s]' of convention – and exemplifies a 'fifth gear of freedom', incorporating lengthy detours from its original script. (The poem is, ostensibly, about hitting a dog on the motorway, but it takes three stanzas to get to the point: the narrative keeps giving way to accumulative detail, the 'central' to the 'centrifugal'.)⁴⁶ Superficially concerned with the speaker's *failure* to deviate from the 'headward' path – the straight line from office 'to-do lists' to the domestic version – and with the contrast raised between this stratified existence and the 'whirligigging' of the dog, the poem embodies imaginatively what its speaker claims not to have achieved, giving over two stanzas to description of the conditions of escape:

I might have drifted off, crossed over lanes
to collide in a slipstream of coming
and going, never here nor there but up
in the air (*HD*, 54)

Crucially, however, whilst escapism (or 'freedom') is lauded in the poem, it also manifests itself, like forgetting in 'Strangers', as a form of (imaginative?) death. As the speaker of 'Strangers' figures the new furniture with which he decks his house as something in which he will be 'coffined', likewise, failure to assume responsibility

equates, here, with suicide (*HD*, 44). Both paradigms of ‘cross[ing] over’ explored in the poem – that of the dog and, subsequently, the day-dreaming narrator – result in a ‘*Dumph!*’ from which only the latter is fortunate enough to emerge. While the dog’s collision is literal and fatal (forming a precedent from which the poem’s speaker must diverge), Gillis’s is syntactical, born of a shift between chasing will ’o the wisps and ‘chasing homeward’ to the responsibilities of fatherhood. This latter, contrary to what’s suggested elsewhere in the poem, comes to represent the very ‘veer’ and ‘bend’ for which he has yearned throughout:

When I finally steered and veered the bend
into Belfast and turned into my street
I could have killed for a takeaway
but it was my turn to take the boy’s
fire engine, fluffy dog and laser gun
to bed where we lay below his globed atlas lamp,
self-timed to fade, rotating projected
continents on the borderlined walls’
night-blue planetarium, where we read
until drift-off into nothing, unmoored
from the axled turn and low-watt embers
of the earth’s spinning top left long behind.

(*HD*, 55)

The poem presents a finely-tuned combination of freedom and responsibility: a situation of mutual dependency where one inheres in, cannot occur without, the other. Like many of the poems in the book, ‘Driving Home’ only arrives at this realisation as the result of a lengthy and troublesome journey – of having been allowed to go its

own way, to fly wide of the mark and have to find its own road back. In linguistic / syntactical terms, it also suggests that it has found the perfect balance. Whilst it's one of Gillis's 'mind-boggled rover' poems (and benefits from being allowed to stretch or 'blossom' to its full capacity), the segmentation into stanzas indicates that this burgeoning may only occur satisfactorily within the framework of a recognisable destination ('home'), just as the framework is more functional for permitting the subject individual transgressions. The final assumption of responsibility may, as in 'The Lad', appear to suggest the 'centrifugal' as negative. In 'The Lad', the spiralling of definition or naming (spurred by delight in language itself, the means by which one thing suggests another) results in waste rather than fertility – a spewing of potential 'into the [vacant] tax disc of the sun' (*HD*, 43). But in both poems, careful qualifications lurk behind this surface message. Primarily an exercise in destabilising one of Craig's deluded subjects – the man who is not 'unsure of his name' – 'The Lad' is suggestive not only of fragmentation, but of the high utopian breadth of capability inherent *in* the destabilised self or thing. Stretching the boundaries too far may result in a sense of self (or 'lad') as nothing, but it also gestures in the opposite direction. Likewise, the unexpected lift at the close of 'Driving Home' valorises the poet's ability to 'drift-off into nothing, unmoored' from the predictable circling of 'the earth's spinning top', and able to occupy imaginatively 'projected/ continents'. Although these continents play upon – indeed, derive from – the 'borderlined walls' of empirical reality, they are different from it in reach and kind. They represent the power of the imagination to reconfigure fact.

'Laganside', perhaps Gillis's finest work to date and the poem with which *Hawks and Doves* concludes (*HD*, 73-77), also works with the Bakhtinian assumption that within 'the centrifugal forces of language' lie the key to its (and society's)

continuance and growth.⁴⁷ Written, like ‘Driving Home’, in a series of stanzas which, while separate, form part of the same loosely-structured narrative, the poem takes its reader on a leisurely walk through contemporary Belfast via the riverside path from which its name derives. Stretching from the Ormeau Embankment in south-central Belfast to districts in the east of the city, this path encompasses both redevelopment sites (such as the Waterfront Hall and Hilton complex) and also areas of economic deprivation less visible on the post-ceasefire map. Accordingly, what the poem offers is not the unified front of achieved organisicism, but ‘something whole but shifting’: a complex of simultaneities which are nonetheless the ‘features’ of an identifiable ‘face’. Although Gillis is wary of ‘easy rapture’ in the poem – ‘these sights have not/ been to me some happy-clappy totem’ – and hastens to acknowledge that the past, ‘like a grey-quiffed and tattooed uncle’, is still battling it out on the ‘night-/club floor’, the vision of Belfast he presents is of a city at peace with its own heterogeneity, ‘flushed and peach-blushed’, like the speaker himself, ‘with pleasure/ at the thought of coming to a head’:

having it out once and forever
as the missing months and years dredge
past the message of washed-out slogans//
the river overrunning its own ledge
to find itself played out in a final flush
into open seas, under drizzled rain,
while the sky arrests an outbound plane,
and my better half lags behind to savour
the shifting terrain, leaving me to find
our way back to the streets, knowing
I’ll never leave here, or come back again.

(*HD*, 77)

This is a city (and a poetic) which has come a long way since the clotted insecurities of 'The Ulster Way'. It manages to combine identity and difference, to merge its 'masochistic home truth' with the 'clean public walkway' of the progressive space. Describing himself as someone who has 'never learned the name for anything', Gillis performs for Belfast here an act of transcendent reconfiguration. Though aware of the propensity to 'exaggerate' or falsify via the means of metamorphic language, he recognises also that 'it really is/ great to stick on names that you've heard/ to whatever you like without caring'. As in the speaker's 'hardly-haired fingers' rests a potential 'pigeon's neck or tortoiseshell', so 'within the unhappy city' is always contained 'a happy city unaware of itself', and, 'Laganside' suggests, poetry can play a crucial part in excavating or illuminating it (*HD*, 73-76; *SS*, 57). Of paramount significance is the poem's immersion in (as opposed to skirting round or aerial vision of) the city, and its consequent acceptance of a condition of imperfectability and partial vision. Dialectical opposites are held in harmony; 'half' meets 'better half' without a battle for precedence. Against the Romantic urge to soar (and, likewise, the post-modern indulgence in chaos), the poem offers a measured combine of restraint and excess, elbow-room and organisation. Past, present and future juxtapose comfortably in the image of a river / city which is always the same and always different, which can and yet can never be stepped into 'twice'.⁴⁸ As with Bakhtin's definition of discourse, polis and poetic recognise here that the functional present lives not so much in consummation as in a perpetual "living impulse...toward the object."⁴⁹

The poet's relation to the public exists in his / her ability to hold a lamp as well as a mirror, to exemplify the possibilities as well as reflect the flaws. Across two collections Alan Gillis has performed the latter function unflinchingly, proving himself a poet who, though desperate to 'take leaf and root', has been unwilling to falsify the necessary complexity of what Paul Bew describes as 'a "first draft of history": the effort to catch – in a moment which is always unrepeatable – the...meaning of events as they unfold in front of the observers' eyes' (*HD*, 49; 51).⁵⁰ He has thus earned the right to offer imaginative visions of achievement, realisations of the 'something better' towards which, in his own essay on Kavanagh, he suggests poet and public ought to strive.⁵¹ In 'Laganside' this poet of the process has come home, if only in the sense that coming home means recognising that 'anything can [yet] happen',⁵² and appreciating that the modern nation, like the living language, must mingle lasting values with a condition of 'today-ness',⁵³ must 'get to grips with the idea of [itself]...as a palimpsest',⁵⁴ and, perhaps most importantly, must learn to accept what it has been and what it currently is. One could do worse than follow such an example.

¹ Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere*, 9. Further references will be incorporated into the text under the abbreviation *SS*.

² Carson, *The Ballad of HMS Belfast*, 30.

³ Mahon, *Lives*, 24.

⁴ Parker, *The Imprint of History*, 162.

⁵ Gillis, Interview with Miriam Gamble.

⁶ Paterson, *The Eyes*, 56.

⁷ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 271.

⁸ Allen, 'Longley's Long Line', 128.

⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

¹⁰ Allen, 'Longley's Long Line', 128.

¹¹ Kelly and Gillis, Introduction, *Critical Ireland*, xvii.

¹² Kelly and Gillis, *Critical Ireland*, xvi.

¹³ Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 38. Further references will be incorporated into the text under the abbreviation *HD*.

¹⁴ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 93.

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- ¹⁵ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 94.
- ¹⁶ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 95.
- ¹⁷ Cox, 'Keeping Going: Beyond Good Friday', 166.
- ¹⁸ Arthur, 'Conflict, Memory and Reconciliation', 143.
- ¹⁹ MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, 23.
- ²⁰ Mahon, *The Snow Party*, 8 (italics mine).
- ²¹ Michael Longley, *Gorse Fires*, 17.
- ²² Edna Longley, 'Northern Ireland: commemoration, elegy, forgetting', 230-231.
- ²³ Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement*, 84. For a discussion of the problem or 'crisis' of 'the end of the poem' see Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 109-115.
- ²⁴ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 93.
- ²⁵ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 46.
- ²⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 75-76.
- ²⁷ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 46.
- ²⁸ Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 220.
- ²⁹ Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 207; 211.
- ³⁰ Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, 14.
- ³¹ Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, 13.
- ³² Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 19.
- ³³ Cox, 'Keeping Going', 156.
- ³⁴ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 94-95.
- ³⁵ Gillis, Interview with Miriam Gamble.
- ³⁶ Michael Longley, *Secret Marriages*, 2.
- ³⁷ Michael Longley, *No Continuing City*, 20.
- ³⁸ Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 266.
- ³⁹ Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 212. See also p.223, where Craig argues that "people live simultaneously in several narratives; their identity is not unity – it is precisely the intersection of diverse but contiguous narratives. They are present and absent simultaneously in a variety of spaces".
- ⁴⁰ Quigley, 'Achieving Transformational Change', 15.
- ⁴¹ Muir, *The Estate of Poetry*, 7-9.
- ⁴² Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 212.
- ⁴³ Cairns Craig, *Out of History*, 212.
- ⁴⁴ MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, 138.
- ⁴⁵ 'Porter' is a re-write of 'Pale Butterwort' by Michael Longley. See Longley, *The Weather in Japan*, 2.
- ⁴⁶ For a definition of the relationship between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' trends in language, see Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 270-272.
- ⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 270.
- ⁴⁸ MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, 137. See also Quigley, 'Achieving Transformational Change', 12: '[During the Cold War] Nixon believed that foreign policy should be strategy, not crusade....He did not see relations with the Soviet Union in all-or-nothing terms but as a mixed bag of issues with varying degrees of solubility. The Nixon/ Kissinger mindset had no utopian vision of some grand final outcome, some terminal point at which all problems are solved. For them, the new world is made up of the patient accumulation of partial successes'. This matches Gillis's approach to Belfast in 'Laganside'.
- ⁴⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 292.
- ⁵⁰ Bew, *Making and Remaking*, 4.
- ⁵¹ Gillis, 'Poetics of the Peasant', 95.
- ⁵² Heaney, *District and Circle*, 13.
- ⁵³ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 25.
- ⁵⁴ Patricia Craig, Introduction, *The Belfast Anthology*, xii.

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